

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY PRAGUE

AMEMBASSY SOFIA

AMEMBASSY WARSAW

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 MOSCOW 12386

E. O. 11652: GDS

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SUBJ: POLITICAL IMPACT OF SOVIET HARVEST SHORTFALL

1. SUMMARY. IF REPORTED CIA ESTIMATE OF 165 MILLION TON GRAIN PRODUCTION IS CORRECT, LARGE SHORTFALL IN THE SOVIET GRAIN HARVEST WILL PROBABLY LEAD TO SOME UNOFFICIAL RATIONING AND PUBLIC EXHORTATION AGAINST WASTE OF BREAD AND FEEDING BREAD TO LIVESTOCK; DETERIORATION IN BREAD QUALITY; AND PERHAPS SOME DISTRESS SLAUGHTERING OF LIVESTOCK (WITH ONE-SHOT INCREASES IN MEAT SUPPLIES). LOCAL SHORTAGES OUTSIDE MAJOR CITIES PROBABLY WILL DEVELOP. HOWEVER, PRICE HIKES ARE NOT FORESEEN FOR POLITICAL REASONS, AND WHILE THE POSSIBILITY OF PUBLIC DISTURBANCES CANNOT BE RULED OUT THEY DO NOT SEEM LIKELY.

POLITICALLY, THE SHORTFALL SHOULD HAVE SOME EFFECT ON DOMESTIC

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POLITICAL MANEUVERING BEFORE THE 25TH CPSU CONGRESS MEETS NEXT

FEBRUARY AND MAY AFFECT POLITBURO MEMBERS POLYANSKIY (WHO SUFFERED AFTER THE POOR 1972 HARVEST), AND KULAKOV (WHO DID WELL). THE MAJOR DOMESTIC IMPACT OF THE SHORTFALL IS LIKELY TO OCCUR NEXT SPRING, AND THE SOVIETS WILL PROBABLY SEEK TO MUDDLE THROUGH TILL THEN AND DELAY INTERNAL CONSEQUENCES AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE TILL AFTER THE CONGRESS.

2. INTERNATIONALLY, ANY GRAIN SHORTFALL CONFRONTS THE SOVIETS WITH CHOICES AMONG CUTTING SHIPMENTS TO EASTERN EUROPE, BELT-TIGHTENING AT HOME, AND DRAWING DOWN RESERVES OF GOLD, GRAIN AND/OR FOREIGN EXCHANGE. SOVIET PRACTICE FURING PREVIOUS CRISES AND SENSITIVITY TO THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF EAST EUROPEAN CONSUMERISM MAKE IT UNLIKELY THE SOVIETS WILL CUT SHIPMENTS TO THEIR ALLIES, ALTHOUGH THEY MAY SEEK TO EXACT A POLITICAL PRICE FOR MAINTAINING DELIVERIES. THERE ARE ALSO POLITICAL LIMITS TO BELT-TIGHTENING HERE. THUS, DRAWING DOWN RESERVES WOULD BE THE LINE OF LEAST RESISTANCE, BUT THIS APPROACH TOO HAS UNWELCOME IMPLICATIONS: IT MAKES IT HARDER TO FINISH THE FIVE-YEAR PLAN, AND IT REDUCES SOVIET BARGAINING POWER IN INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC NEGOTIATIONS. WHILE THE RESORCE SQUEEZE WILL PROBABLY NOT BE SEVERE ENOUGH TO INDUCE EITHER GENERAL TOUGHENING OR GENERAL SOFTENING IN THE SOVIET APPROACH TO DETENTE, IT SHOULD RESULT IN A MORE CHASTENED APPROACH TO SOVIET INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC PROSPECTS, AND IT MAY WELL MAKE THE SOVIETS MORE AMENABLE TO PRODUCTIVE BARGAINING IN SELECTIVE AREAS. IDEALLY THEY WOULD PREFER TO AVOID LINKAGES AND RESTRICT THE SCOPE OF BARGAINING TO BILATERAL ECONOMIC DEALS WITH MAJOR PARTNERS, BUT THERE MAY BE ADVANTAGES TO PROBING SOVIET WILLINGNESS TO BARGAIN OUTSIDE THE PURELY BILATERAL CONTEXT AS WELL, FOR INSTANCE WITH REGARD TO PARTICIPATION IN A WORLD FOOD RESERVE PLAN. END SUMMARY.

MANAGING THE SHORTFALL AT HOME

3. THE SIZE OF THE SOVIET HARVEST SHORTFALL WILL NOT BE KNOWN UNTIL OCTOBER OR NOVEMBER, BUT USG ESTIMATES INDICATE THAT IT WILL BE PAINFULLY LARGE. ORDINARY SOVIET CITIZENS ARE ALREADY AWARE THAT THE HARVEST IS POOR BOTH FROM THEIR PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS AND FROM FOREIGN BROADCASTS. AS THE LADERSHIP BECOMES AWARE OF THE DIMENSIONS OF THE SHORTFALL, A PRESS CAMPAIGN

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TO REDUCE WASTAGE OF BREAD WILL PROBABLY INTENSIFY; EARLY INDICATIONS APPEARED IN PRAVDA IN LATE JUNE AND WERE FAIRLY EXPLICIT IN IZVESTIYA ON AUGUST 25. A LIKELY TARGET OF UNOFFICIAL RATIONING AND PRESS JAWBONING WILL BE THE UNIQUE SOVIET CUSTOM OF FEEDING BREAD TO PRIVATELY-OWNED LIVESTOCK, A DIRECT RESULT OF FIXING LOW SUBSIDIZED PRICES FOR BREAD AND HIGH PRICES FOR ANIMAL PRODUCTS. PREVIOUS SHORTAGE YEARS, SUCH AS 1962/3 AND 1972, PROVOKED JUST SUCH A COMBINATION OF

RATIONING AND EXHORTATION. THE QUALITY OF WHITE BREAD PROBABLY WILL DETERIORATE AS MILLERS LEAVE MORE SHORTS AND BRAN IN THE FLOUR, AND WHITE FLOUR MAY BECOME SCARCE IN RETAIL STORES. HOWEVER, THERE IS NO PROSPECT FOR INCREASES IN THE PRICE OF BREAD, A POLITICAL UNTOUCHABLE. IT SEEMS LIKELY THAT LARGE-SCALE NONAVAILABILITY OF FEED GRAINS (IF SUCH IS THE CASE) WILL LEAD TO SOME DISTRESS SLAUGHTERING OF LIVESTOCK. ALTHOUGH IT WOULD RETARD LONG-RANGE PLANS TO BUILD UP MEAT HERDS, THIS RESPONSE WOULD ALSO LEAD TO A SHORT-TERM IMPROVEMENT IN MEAT SUPPLIES DURING LATE WINTER, THE PERIOD IMMEDIATELY PRECEDING THE 25TH PARTY CONGRESS.

4. MANAGING THE SHORTFALL IS LIKELY TO HAVE DIFFERENTIAL EFFECTS IN CITY AND COUNTRY. MAJOR CITIES PROBABLY WILL RECEIVE ADEQUATE SUPPLIES OF BREAD AND FLOUR AS WELL AS ANIMAL PRODUCTS, BUT THE COUNTRYSIDE AND URBAN CENTERS OFF THE BEATEN PATH WILL SUFFER FOOD SHORTAGES, AS IN OTHER YEARS. AGAIN, PILGRIMAGES TO MOSCOW AND OTHER LARGE CITIES TO BUY FOODSTUFFS WILL SUPPLEMENT THE USUAL FLOW OF SHOPPERS FROM LESS FAVORED AREAS. PUBLIC GRUMBLING OVER SHORTAGES WILL PROBABLY INCREASE, BUT, AS IN 1972, THE REGIME WILL OBVIOUSLY DO EVERYTHING IT CAN TO AVOID A REPETITION OF SUCH DISTURBANCES AS THE NOVOCHERKASSK RIOTS (TRIGGERED BY POPULAR RESENTMENT OVER FOOD EXPORTS TO CUBA).

POSSIBLE DOMESTIC POLITICAL EFFECTS

5. THE PATTERN OF OFFICIAL RESPONSE TO THE 1972 CROP FAILURE PROVIDES SOME INDICATORS ON HOW SOVIETS MAY HANDLE THIS YEAR'S SHORTFALLS POLITICALLY. AT THAT TIME MASSIVE SOVIET PURCHASES OF FOREIGN GRAIN, CHIEFLY AMERICAN, WERE TARDILY AND RELUCTANTLY ADMITTED TO THE PUBLIC ONLY BY THE PHRASE THAT "NECESSARY MEASURES HAD BEEN TAKEN" TO MITIGATE EFFECTS OF POOR HARVEST. BUT PERSONNEL ACTIONS FOLLOWED IN EARLY 1973, WHEN DIMITRIY

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POLYANSKIY WAS DEMOTED FROM FIRST DEPUTY PREMIER TO MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE AND Z. NURIYEV WAS APPOINTED DEPUTY PREMIER IN CHARGE OF AGRICULTURAL MATTERS.

6. THE POOR 1975 HARVEST COMES AT AN EMBARRASSING MOMENT FOR THE CPSU AND BREZHNEV, SINCE THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MARCH 1965 CC PLENUM WAS CELEBRATED RECENTLY WITH GREAT CREDIT GIVEN BREZHNEV PERSONALLY FOR LAUNCHING A FARM PROGRAM DESIGNED TO STABILIZE HARVESTS. INCREASING AND IMPROVING THE MEAT SUPPLY IS, OF COURSE, A WELL-PUBLICIZED COMMITMENT OF THE PRESENT LEADERSHIP, AND A SETBACK CAUSED BY DISTRESS SLAUGHTERING, WHATEVER THE TEMPORARY IMPROVEMENT IN MEAT SUPPLIES, WOULD NOT GO UNNOTICED. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN WHETHER THE SOVIETS LAUNCH NEW INITIATIVES TO DEFLECT ATTENTION FROM THEIR AGRICULTURAL WEAKNESSES, AS THEY HAVE IN THE PAST, OR SIMPLY BLAME THE

CLIMATE AND THE WEATHER. IN ANY CASE, IT IS LIKELY THAT ALLOCATIONS TO AGRICULTURE WILL INCREASE DURING UPCOMING FIVE-YEAR PLAN.

7. IN LEADERSHIP TERMS, THE FACT THAT PREPARATIONS FOR THE 25TH PARTY CONGRESS IN FEBRUARY ARE UNDERWAY MAY MAGNIFY THE POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF THE SHORTFALLS. PRE-CONGRESS POLITICAL MANEUVERING COULD BE EXPECTED TO GIVE A FILLIP TO THE TRADITIONAL CPSU TEMPTATION TO SEEK SCAPEGOATS FOR NATURAL DISASTERS, AND THE COMBINATION OF INCENTIVES MIGHT WELL BE STRONG ENOUGH TO OVERCOME THE EUQLLY TRADITIONAL INCLINATION TO CONCEAL DOMESTIC DIFFICULTIES FROM FOREIGN EYES, AS WAS DONE THREE YEARS AGO. WHETHER POLYANSKIY CAN SURVIVE THE 1975 CROP SHORTFALL AFTER THE JOLT HE RECEIVED IN 1973 IS PERHAPS PROBLEMATIC. THE EFFECT ON D.F. KULAKOV, PARTY SECRETARY IN CHARGE OF AGRICULTURE AND ONE OF THOSE CONSIDERED AS A POSSIBLE EVENTUAL SUCCESSOR TO BREZHNEV, IS ALSO UNCLEAR AT THE MOMENT.

INDICATORS MAY APPEAR LATER THIS YEAR DURING THE UPCOMING ROUND OF PARTY ELECTIONS. BUT, IN ANY CASE, WE SEE NO SIGNS AS YET THAT AGRICULTURAL SHORTFALL WILL AFFECT PERSONAL STANDING OF BREZHNEV, KOSYGIN OR OTHER LEADERS AT THE PINNACLE. NOR HAVE WE PERCEIVED (AND WE WOULD WELCOME COMMENT BY WASHINGTON ANALYSTS ON THIS POINT) RECENT EVIDENCE OF FACTIONALISM OR DISPUTES REGARDING AGRICULTURAL POLICY.

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AMCONSUL LENINGRAD
AMCONSUL MUNICH
AMEMBASSY OTTAWA
AMEMBASSY PRAGUE
AMEMBASSY SOFIA
AMEMBASSY WARSAW

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 MOSCOW 12386

MANAGED THE SHORTFALL ABROAD

8. THE FACT THAT THE SOVIETS HAVE ALREADY ENTERED THE WORLD GRAIN MARKET DEMONSTRATES THAT THE RESPONSE TO THE SHORTFALL WILL NOT BE LIMITED TO SUCH DOMESTIC STEPS AS BELT-TIGHTENING, REDUCED QUALITY, AND EXHORTATION. WE EXPECT THEM TO CONTINUE TO PURCHASE GRAIN ABROAD IF IT IS AVAILABLE. HOWEVER, THE SHORTFALL IS LIKELY TO HAVE OTHER INTERNATIONAL RAMIFICATIONS, IN TWO WAYS. FIRST, AT THE LEVEL OF PRACTICAL INTERDEPENDENCE, ANY GRAIN SHORTFALL CONFRONTS THE SOVIETS WITH A HOBSON'S CHOICE AMONG REDUCED DELIVERIES TO EASTERN EUROPE, BELT-TIGHTENING AND POLITICAL JOCKEYING AT HOME, AND DRAWING DOWN GOLD, FOREIGN CURRENCY AND/OR GRAIN IN ORDER TO SUPPLY BOTH DOMESTIC AND EAST EUROPEAN MARKETS AT PLANNED LEVELS. THESE PROBLEMS--AND THE NECESSARY DECISIONS--WILL IMPINGE ON OVERALL DETENTE STRATEGY AT CONFIDENTIAL

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AT TIME WHEN THE SOVIET INTERNATIONAL AGENDA IS CROWDED WITH DEADLINES: SALT, THE WASHINGTON SUMMIT, THE EUROPEAN COMMUNIST CONFERENCE, THE PARTY CONGRESS ITSELF.

9. WITH REGARD TO THE EAST EUROPEAN ASPECT, WE SUSPECT THE SOVIETS WILL CHOOSE TO HONOR GRAIN DELIVERY COMMITMENT TO THEIR ALLIES EVEN IF IT MEANS SOME COMBINATION OF BELT-TIGHTENING AND DRAWDOWN OF RESERVES HERE. THEY DID SO IN 1962/3 WHEN THEY WERE FACED WITH A CRISIS, INSTEAD OF MERELY SHORTFALLS. SINCE THEN THEIR RESERVE AND SUPPLY POSITIONS HAVE IMPROVED, AND THEY HAVE COME TO RECOGNIZE CONSUMERISM AS THE MAJOR POLITICAL FORCE IT IS IN EASTERN EUROPE. ESPECIALLY AT A TIME WHEN THEY ARE REINFORCING DISCIPLINE IN THEIR HALF OF THE CONTINENT IN THE WAKE OF CSCE (AND ARE SENSITIVE TO GIEREK'S SUPPLY PROBLEMS LAST SPRING), IT IS UNLIKELY THAT THEY WILL TAKE THE RISK OF CUTTING BACK DELIVERIES, ALTHOUGH THEY MAY WELL SEEK TO EXACT A POLITICAL

PRICE FOR MAINTAINING THEM.

10. CONSUMERISM IS ALSO A POLITICAL FORCE HERE, HOWEVER, EVEN IF IT IS MORE EASILY ALLAYED THAN IN EASTERN EUROPE, AND THERE IS IN OUR VIEW A FAIRLY STRICT LIMIT TO POLITICAL MANEUVERING OVER THIS ISSUE WITHIN THE LEADERSHIP DURING THE PRE-CONGRESS PERIOD, SINCE THE STAKES ARE TOO HIGH. IT FOLLOWS THAT THE LINE OF LEAST RESISTANCE IN DEALING WITH THE INTERNATIONAL RAMIFICATIONS OF THE SHORTFAL WOULD BE TO DRAW DOWN RESERVES OF GRAIN, GOLD AND/OR FOREIGN CURRENCY. THE EXTENT OF DRAWDOWN, AGAIN, WILL DEPEND ON THE PERCEIVED MAGNITUDE OF THE CRISIS, BUT DRAWDOWN SEEMS THE MOST PLAUSIBLE APPROACH FOR THE SOVIETS TO TAKE.

11. HOWEVER, DRAWDOWN OF SUCH RESERVES WOULD ALSO HAVE UNWELCOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOVIETS. FIRST, IT MAKES THE TASK OF DEVELOPING THE NEXT FIVE-YEAR PLAN IN TIME FOR THE CONGRESS EVEN MORE COMPLICATED THAN IT IS ALREADY. SECOND, HOWEVER, IT REDUCES SOVIET BARGAINING POWER IN ECONOMIC NEGOTIATIONS WITH DEVELOPED MARKET COUNTRIES. HAVING RIDDEN HIGH ON THE CONTRAST BETWEEN CAPITALIST INSTABILITY AND BALANCE OF PAYMENTS DIFFICULTIES AND SOVIET STABILITY IN BOTH PROPAGANDA AND NEGOTIATIONS SINCE 1973, THE SOVIETS MUST NOW ENVISAGE A RETURN TO THE MORE NORMAL SITUATION WHERE THEY ARE BARGAINING FOR NEEDED INPUTS FROM THE WEST WHILE FACED WITH SCARCITIES AT HOME.

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12. SHORT-TERM PROSPECT IS THAT THE SOVIETS CAN MUDDLE THROUGH THE WINTER: THE CRUNCH, IF ANY, IS LIABLE TO COME NEXT SPRING,, AFTER THE CONGRESS. IT IS UNLIKELY, THEREFORE, THAT THE DEVELOPING TIGHT SUPPLY SITUATION AND ITS ATTENDANT POLITICAL PROBLEMS WILL PROVOKE EITHER A HARDENING OR A SOFTENING OF SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY ATTITUDES ALL ALONG THE LINE.

13. AT THE SAME TIME, THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP WILL BE AWARE THAT THESE PROBLEMS DO OR WILL EXIST AND WILL BE FACTORING THEM INTO ITS APPROACH TO THE DETENTE AGENDA. IN GENERAL, THEIR EXISTENCE MAY WELL REINFORCE THE INCLINATION TO A MODERATE AND BUSINESS-LIKE APPROACH TO DEALINGS WITH THE WEST WHICH DETENTE HAD NURTURED. ON SPECIFICS, IT IS DIFFICULT TO PREDICT THE EFFECTS -- PARTICULARLY FROM THIS LIMITED VANTAGE POINT. AT ONE EXTREME, THERE IS NO LIKELIHOOD THAT THEIR SOURCES SQUEZE WILL INDUCE THE SOVIETS TO MAKE BASIC CONCESSIONS IN CRITICAL NEGOTIATIONS SUCH AS SALT. BUT IT IS PROBABLE THAT THE UNFAVORABLE GRAIN SITUATION, BY REMINDING THEM THAT THEY TOO ARE INTERDEPENDENT, WILL MAKE THEM MORE AMENABLE TO PRODUCTIVE BARGAINING IN SPECIFIC AREAS.

14. IT WOULD BE NATURAL IF THEY SOUGHT TO RESTRICT THE SCOPE AND EXTEND OF SUCH BARGAINING, AND IDEAL FROM THEIR POINT F VIEW IF IT COULD BE RESTRICTED TO ADVANTAGEOUS ARRANGEMENTS IN THE

ECONOMIC FIELD WITH THEIR MAJOR POTENTIAL LARGE GRAIN SUPPLIER,
THE U.S. HOWEVER, IT OCCURS TO US THAT IN VIEW OF SOVIET
AGRICULTURAL DIFFICULTIES, WASHINGTON MAY WISH TO REEXAMINE THE
ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ATTEMPTING TO DRAW THE SOVIETS
MORE INTO WORLD ECONOMIC DISCUSSIONS ON A BASIS BROADER THAN OUR
OWN BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP. AS AN EXAMPLE, THE SOVIETS MIGHT
NOW SEE PARTICIPATION IN A WORLD FOOD RESERVE SYSTEM AS MORE
ADVANTAGEOUS THAN IN THE PAST. BEYOND FOOD, HOWEVER, THE
PROBLEM CAUSED BY THE GRAIN SHORTFALL MAY SHOW THE SOVIETS THAT
THEY ARE SOMEWHAT MORE INTERDEPENDENT WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD THAN
THEY EXPECTED AND HOPED DURING THE WORST OF THE WESTERN ECONOMIC
CRISIS.
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